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## THE MODERN MAN'S RELIGION: A SOCIAL QUESTION

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The religious question of an earlier day was, "Are *you* saved, my brother?" Matters have changed since then. Religion at this moment is but slightly a matter for individual concern or query, while it is very decidedly of serious importance to social thinkers and sociological conferences. As matter of fact, a consideration of the "state of religion" in our present day is no longer a mere courtesy to constituted religion but is a necessary logical preliminary to sociological reconstruction as such. For consider the significance of religion from the social idealist's point of view. One may calculate to the nicest exactitude every needed remedy for our glaring maladjustments, yet that result all by itself will be of no worth until the crucial question is answered whether, after all this information and wisdom has been gained, people of the average sort are going to pay any attention to it, let alone act accordingly. It is or should be plain that in social betterment as in life in general, though men by the grace of science know all mysteries and all knowledge, yet if they have not love, all social panaceas are condemned to be but effervescent dreams and much-whipped syllabub. The perception of values is nothing, except there be a fundamental and innate recognition of values as absolutely and beyond argument binding. The many imposing models of desirable social machinery being prepared by skilled draughtsmen within and without

our universities and social settlements and the like, can never be made to *go*, despite all their glistening cogs and cams and innumerable clever devices, without a certain minimum of that spontaneous energy which we call religion. You may prove never so clearly how wages might be raised and taxes be more equalized and how at last, far off, poverty may be abolished. For those in the saddle there is easy reply, "Why give up our advantage? Why not 'let us alone'?" What are our servants and tribute-givers to us? Why are we our brothers' keepers?" To such blustering self-regarding inertia as this, there could be no answer save the appeal to deep realities, which because they *are* cannot by any "why" be shouldered aside.

Still further let it be remarked that in discussing this available energy in the modern man which we call his religion, we are especially, and as sociologists necessarily, interested not in the high potentials of certain individuals or organized bodies of them, but rather in the average gauge-readings, so to speak, of the common run of men upon which—and particularly in a democracy—so much depends. Our concern here, that is to say—and this point should be borne in mind throughout—is not in the least with our modern idealists or our modern saints or our modern churchmen as such. The "modern man" includes saint and sinner, the university graduate and the man on the street, the church-goer and the non-church-goer; not only the idealistic philosopher but also the realistic and the pragmatic and even, if we can find him, the materialistic philosopher. We are inquiring here not into the religion of the conventionally and temperamentally religious, but precisely into the religion of the modern man in all his varieties at once.

To begin with the negative and less creditable aspects of the religion of today, it is to be remembered that the men and women of the present are near-sighted, unable

to grasp that which is less than obvious; to sum it up in a labelling phrase, they are decidedly and unquestionably lacking in religious imagination.

1. There is the current indifference to the fact of immortality. People dislike of course the thought of losing permanently their relatives and close friends; they care that much about immortality. As regards themselves however, the life after death is too far-away to be thought about. Mr. Lowes Dickinson could entitle his Ingersoll Lecture of a few years ago, very significantly in this connection, "Is Immortality Desirable?" To the same purpose is the fact that modern discussions of religion of the non-technical sort practically never include this question at all. Mr. Winston Churchill's recently published novel, *The Inside of the Cup*, for example, ranges over most social and theological matters under heaven. It even drags in by the hair of its head and in the closing chapter, a discussion of the religious view of marriage. It is loudly silent however as to immortality, for the reason that the modern man is not interested. In the very recent discussions bearing upon this matter from M. Maeterlinck<sup>1</sup> and Sir Oliver Lodge<sup>2</sup> and the considerable public attention excited by them, we have only an apparent refutation of the assertion that people nowadays do not care for immortality. For, I submit, the concern of these writers chiefly, and of their readers wholly, is in the validity of certain alleged messages from the dead. In so far, the modern man's interest is here not in the future nor religious, but present and scientific.

2. Modern lack of imagination in religion appears also no less in the present impatience of authority of every kind. The average man of today is restive under any dogmatic assertion; and this is especially true of

<sup>1</sup> "Life after Death," *Century Magazine*, September, 1913.

<sup>2</sup> Presidential Address (1913) before the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

religious assertions. Our instinctive reply to any downright dictum is, "Why is it so? Who says so?" And usually we add, "What of it if he does say so!" We have none of that deferring to the powers that be, which made life in general and religious life pre-eminently so ordered and so regular in the older days. We have lawlessness indeed everywhere. Who should know that better than the social thinker? It appears not only in lynchings, but in lawyers who specialize upon how to drive coaches and fours through the law of which they should be the guardians. It stalks among us in disobedient children and—the complement of them—careless parents; in easily loosened marriages, and what is called in general the "new ethics," especially the new ethics of sex, which is championed outright by Ellen Key, and less directly but no less really for American readers by Robert Herrick and Albert Edwards and Edith Wharton—not to speak of others much less able. All this chaotic confusion of our times crops out also and naturally in our religion. Self-expression here too is for us more important than loyalty to any authority or even to any consistent course of thought and action. The right to liberty, meaning the right to do as one pleases, is a right everybody thoroughly believes in and more or less universally exercises.

This lawlessness is yet, we must remember, no outbreak of desperate wickedness. It is only a result of the modern man's near-sightedness. He does not despise dignities and authorities as such; his difficulty is that he cannot in any of them discern any real right to command. Statutes are to him not hateful, but impalpable; abstract duty is not detestable but simply non-existent; while that value of a law-abiding attitude which was for Kant so clear and sure is not so much denied as utterly invisible and incomprehensible to him. Only actual force, so it seems, can keep these times in bounds,

and where, as is the case in religion, the old force, fear, has largely vanished, there authority may assert itself as it will; nobody really pays any attention to it whatever.

3. But the modern man's lack of imagination is best summed up and realized in the familiar and characteristic neglect at present of religion in its ecclesiastical forms. This neglect is not due, as in the eighteenth century, to any hostility to clerics and churches. Aside from Spain and Portugal and the countries under their influence, where conditions are peculiar, church leaders are not despised or distrusted. They are on the contrary approved and in financial ways often most generously supported. Yet despite this absence of bitterness the modern man has little to do with the church. The conventional thing, in our United States at least, is to ignore the church altogether. We may like this or not; it is the truth of the matter.

It is the old fault in a new guise. The trouble with the church for the average man today is primarily that it has too many ties uniting it with the past in its phrases and ideas and methods. It keeps open a line of communication in many directions between that which has been and that which is. It repeats creeds of centuries ago, with modern interpretations, to be sure, but with a vital interest in what it calls "the unity of the faith." It has symbols such as Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are no new inventions but came into existence long before this twentieth century dawned, and as to which indeed many even of the church's own members have an interest which, to be frank, is but tepid. The church's services do not for the every-day man appear to be of any immediate practical value; they are, that is, neither lectures nor singing-schools nor entertainments. They have some of the traits of these—I am quoting the average standpoint—but in addition they are pervaded

and even drenched with the historic and the symbolic. The dead hand is upon the church, every church, as well as the living hand. Dead voices are heard there as a constant undertone. And all this which the modern man finds so repellent is not in the least accidental. The church as church rejoices in this solidarity of its present with its past. We church people want such a solidarity and believe that humanity will in the long run be the better for it. But the modern man decidedly does not want it. He is puzzled by all this interest in the remote. The value of the symbolic eludes him. He cares nothing and less than nothing for the historic as such. It is inevitable consequently that he should regard much that goes on in the church as a waste of time and energy. He cannot comprehend the fact that a church may be up-to-date while yet it is glad and proud to thrust its roots back into the immemorial centuries. He cannot realize how a dead-and-gone past may be of value to a living present. He has not sufficient imagination to realize it; that is the sum of his offending. It is again lack of imagination and nothing more sinister which is responsible at bottom for the present temporary ebb of interest in the church as church.

In a word then, to sum up our discussion thus far, one would not be far wrong in dubbing the religion of the modern man prosaic and still under the spell of him whom Dickens so detested—Mr. Gradgrind. Pragmatism, which may fairly be called the current philosophy of this generation, scarcely allows even being to that which is not immediately and rather obviously effective. Christian Science and what calls itself "New Thought," this modern day's contribution to religious thinking, are strong most of all in their suppression of those vain imaginings, as they regard them, which crop out in fear and sickness. Modern comforts lull the modern mind to forget its dreams and outreachings. Modern research

has cowed our imagination and clipped the wings of fancy for all but the infinitesimal few who are themselves engaged in research. The modern man is circumscribed of vision in every realm. How natural therefore that in religion too he should be a man of this world, eschewing all else; proud of his freedom from all taint of other-worldliness when he should rather be ashamed of his narrowness!

Enough has been said of what the religion of the modern man lacks. A much pleasanter task is the attempt to discern what is positive and virile in modern religion.

At the outset, it must be said and with emphasis that these very negative aspects which we have been considering are held true and believed not negatively and for themselves but as the obverse of other positive religious certainties. These obverses are often fallaciously inferred, but they are asserted as deductions and not arrived at in the first place as original fundamental convictions. That is to say, the religion of the modern man, though in certain respects negatively oriented, is not a scepticism; and this is in itself a significant and positive-facing description of the state of affairs. The modern man, for example, justifies his indifference to immortality by insisting upon his concern with present tasks and opportunities. He rejects authorities and dignities, both good and evil, because he is so filled with a sense of the value of the individual. He neglects church-religion because he prefers to be busied in what is to his mind more vitally practical. In a word, these negative aspects of modern religion which have been here enumerated—and they contain, be it remarked, the worst that can be said against present-day religion—do after all show this much that is encouraging, that the modern man even in his religious shortcomings is rather intel-



lectually unenlightened than either morally or religiously culpable.

But the positive reality of the modern man's religion is not merely a fact to be surmised and arrived at in this fashion from negatives. The emphatic and glowing religious spirit of the modern man is there in him as a fact in itself and immediately observable for those that have eyes to see and ears to hear.

1. There is what may be termed the creative energy of these days, an energy which always partakes, wherever found, of the divine. To speak in language which is perhaps more intelligible, I mean that the modern man intensely believes in doing what is practically possible for the increase of order and happiness in the world. This is a trait of our time so frequently met with that we regard it for the most part as a matter of course. But it is no commonplace. It is a religious attitude peculiar to these days and to our Western civilization. The average person in the Orient and even the pundit has none of this eager willingness for improvement, either in himself or in others or in the general life-conditions about him. He starves without complaint. He is wholly submissive; what is, is for him the measure of what must be. All he asks of life is escape in the form of release from the wheel of rebirth. There are of course historic and economic reasons for Eastern fatalism and quietism; but whatever the reasons, this is at all events the situation with him; while on the other hand Occidentals as a whole and Americans in particular take the opposite creative active attitude—not submitting to their environment, but altering it tirelessly; not waiting for things to happen, but going forth and making them happen; not yearning dumbly to elude existence, but improving existence with all their might in every possible respect. Pragmatism's note, here to the point, is downright noble and truly religious; insisting

that it depends upon each individual's sturdy loyalty whether or no the values of life increase or decrease; emphasizing robustly that God is a striving God who must be helped if he is to conquer. That note of practical self-reliance is not only one of the finest doctrines in pragmatism; it is deeply representative of these days, wakening as it does an answering chord in all the modern world. For the modern man is not only sure at the heart of him that improvements in things can be brought about; he looks upon himself as a partner in the project and desires nothing so much as to be up and at the business. He is religious in that he feels the task of bringing order out of chaos definitely and peculiarly laid upon him. The duty of accomplishing something tangible, the call to effect something worth while, does not in him find deaf ears, but on the contrary sets him at once into a high state of tension and action. Is not this a positive and splendid quality of present-day religion? If Jesus exalted the publicans and harlots above the Pharisees because the publicans and harlots were living up to what they knew, while the Pharisees were not,—in so far putting practical obedience above theoretical insight—may we not appeal to his authority for believing of the average man, wofully blind though he often is, that his religion is yet real, since he too is energetic and downright in his pursuit of the charity and usefulness and righteousness which he does see?

So far as our social thinkers and plan-makers are concerned, let them be well assured that the modern man will undertake at their behest any social helpfulness which promises sure returns of enhanced social justice. Our social experts must make their proposals and the reasons for them very, very plain. They must not scold if the average man cannot at once take their point of view. Only let them still be patient and persistent,

since, when they do convince him at length, they will have gained an immediate partisan and an enthusiastic co-worker.

2. Then for another religious quality of the modern man, there is his pity for the needy, his fellow-feeling for the under-dog, his many points of resemblance to the good Samaritan whenever he meets one who has fallen by the wayside. One is not in these days obliged to prove by syllogisms or Biblical citations the brotherhood of man. Everybody knows its reality, for everybody lives by it. A woman taken ill in the railway coach always finds a coachful of friends immediately busied in ministering to her. A child lost is safe in appealing to practically any passer-by. A great tornado or flood will scarcely bring misery faster than express and telegraph bring clothing and money and sympathy. A clear case of injustice to any—as to Miss Ellen Stone or in the Dreyfus case—will put men by the thousands up in arms until the wrong is righted. The modern man cannot pass by suffering unmoved. The ancients could easily do so; heathen countries, most of them at least, still can; but the modern man cannot. The rise of pity, individual and social, is a characteristic religious trait of the modern Christian world. Our very temptation in these days to sentimentality in our sympathy, undeniably indicates a deep-lying sentiment of sympathy which must be there in order to be counterfeited and torn into tatters. The brotherhood of man is not a religious theory but a religious faith; it is not an assertion but a never-failing spring of action. Even our theologians appreciate this. At all events, most theologians in these days, if they will observe their mental processes, will find themselves tacitly, if not overtly, inferring the fatherhood of God from the brotherhood of man, and not *vice-versa*, as it used to be and as it is in the New Testament. This does not disprove in any sense the father-

hood of God, but it does show how basal and sure is our consciousness of human kinship.

It may be objected when one asserts roundly the sympathy of the present generation: "How about the social problems of this very day? What of the miseries of the poor which exist largely because somebody 'higher up' has sold them for a pair of shoes? Are there no black examples, blacker today than ever before, of man's inhumanity to man? Is this the sympathy of the modern man?" No, it is not sympathy, far from it! But let us bear in mind that these and other ugly forms of modern injustice are very largely the results of the immense enlarging and consequent depersonalizing of industry and commerce at present. If Northern capitalists could see in their own suburb the little children whose wholesome development is forfeited for the sake of their dividends, they would not allow child-labor in the factories whose stock they control. If the bargain-hunter had as her next-door neighbor the sweat-shop toiler whose loss is her gain, she would not need to be converted to the idea of the "consumer's label." If the waterers of stock and upholders of high tariff could realize the multitudes of poor who for years must go without many necessities of life to make up the tale of overabundant luxury which they, the privileged, enjoy, how soon would they sicken of their dollars, the emblem of success in their predatory businesses! Much, that is, which looks like an absence of sympathy is in reality a failure to perceive any need for sympathy. The distance is so great between such malefactors and their victims that many malefactors nowadays never dream that there is a victim at all! It is, then, not the modern man's religion but again his insight which is at fault. His old lack of imagination it is which vitiates, in such terrible fashion sometimes, a fellow-feeling for men which is yet in itself deep-rooted and exuberant.

3. Again, the religion of the modern man appears in the way in which life is for him skied over with an optimism which can scarcely be called anything but typical of these times. Our men of today are sure in general that things are "very good." In Germany Nietzsche the optimist has succeeded to the vogue of Schopenhauer the pessimist. In France Bergson is singing the praises of the "*élan vital*" and "creative evolution," that is to say, of life if we will but live. In Russia Artzibashev is as actual as Andreev and far, far more influential, as the Ssaninist movement, regrettable as it is, plainly shows. England has its Robert Louis Stevenson and the author of *The Road Mender*; America has its James and Royce and Christian Science. Each of these and many others are illustrations of the fact that there is among the men of thought today an undying growing confidence that "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world!"

Or there are the doers of the present, the Napoleons of business, the inventors and scientific discoverers, the travellers in Africa or Thibet or to North or South Pole, the missionaries toiling unweariedly in and upon alien civilizations. All these phenomena of human activity in this time are even more clearly expressions of the modern irrepressibility of energy and spirits. Our explorers and pioneers are, as such, forever again and again removing mountains by their faith and hopefulness. This is a developing expansive age such as has not been since the days of the Renaissance. Pessimisms, even though now and then broached among us, cannot live. They pale and fade away for lack of suitable air and soil in our all-encompassing flamboyant optimism.

All this has, it is admitted, its dangers. Men are sadly forgetting the reality of evil and sin, and that often in highly hazardous degenerations. We are just now having to do without that antiseptic of dread which older

days had in their ghosts and banshees and were-wolves and, beneath all, a hell which burned real and sulphurous fire. There is, as everybody knows, all too much of a fatuous smugness in the optimism now met with. We have certainly some of the faults of this virtue of ours, but the virtue is here and we may confidently expect that optimism, broadened and sobered, cleansed and in its right mind, will yet do its part in bringing new victories to this age which is already in so many directions doing things.

4. Finally, it should be remarked that the modern man's religion is social in its ways of expressing itself. I mean by that not alone that we are attacking social evils socially, by dissemination of facts, discussion, legislation, but that in our deeper religious feelings we tend to draw together with those who, in any particular details, are like-minded with ourselves. The upshot is that today's religion is, probably with a thoroughness few of us realize, an organized matter. It is interesting and often even amusing to mark how closely bred to type in this regard modern humanity is. Religion today does not, it is true, much organize about the church, but it is, for all that, not an individualistic affair. Men find organization for their religious ideas by taking the daily or weekly organ of their hobby of reform; by putting their names down on a subscription list for a dollar or five dollars each; by forming a committee or bureau or conference in view of this or that intolerable situation; above all by frantically joining, joining, joining in every direction various organizations of any and every conceivable kind. Do any of us grasp the great number of these which have arisen and are now in actual existence to express and make practical a common faith which is only to be termed, if we will be accurate, a religious faith? Not to speak of the church in its various denominations, nor of its more or less affiliated societies,

as the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor, the Young Men's or the Young Women's Christian Association, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the like; not to dwell upon the Socialists or the "Single-taxers" or the Labor Unions or the Woman's Suffrage attempts,—not to speak of any of these which are so well known as to occur to one on the spur of the moment, let me set down the names of a few out of many bodies which are so live and concretely prosperous that their names are to be found upon the list of national or international conventions for the year 1913,—the American Conference on Social Insurance, the American Prison Association, the Public Health Association, the International Conference on Infant Mortality, the International Congress against Alcoholism, the National Congress of Mothers, the International Sunshine Society, the World's Citizenship Conference; and all culminating duly in the American Peace Congress and the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration. Beside these taken at random—every reader will think of yet others—are the many clubs and "movements" and "agitations" which are frequently entirely spontaneous and, what is more important, are supported by voluntary and often by nation-wide contributions. It ought to be realized, as it has not yet been realized, that these various organizations for broadly religious ends are parallel to the conventicles and ecclesiasticisms of the more conventional and historic religious bodies. These are the churches of the religion of the modern man, so far as that religion has as yet gone. They are organized, as every church should be, not from above or by any hierarchy, but from below, from the midst of democracy, by the people for the people. This spontaneous democratic socialization of modern religion augurs well, does it not? for the steadiness of progress in the solution of the pressing social problems of the present and future.

This will suffice to suggest, in outline and broadly, what from a social standpoint the religion of the modern man is. It is devoid of that intellectual clarity which the Greeks at their best possessed, but it is strong in that active practical effectiveness of which the Greek knew little. We of today, taken as a whole, do not dream, but we live; we do not worship, but we clothe the naked; we do not pray, but we labor; we have but slight sense of the historic, but we have a virile sense of the present; we have no interest in the other life, but we have a decided interest in the "other fellow." If, as is certain, the two legs of human progress are represented by the seers and the doers, then there can be no doubt that the world is now on the "doing tack," filled to overflowing, as Kipling exults, with sons of Martha. We lack horizon as few ages have lacked it; but, despite all, the religion of men was never so free from selfish motives, never so vital and sincere, as at this moment.

Already that which is wanting in the religion of the modern man bids fair to be added to it. The Church of the present in its ablest and most influential thinkers and preachers is bending every energy, on the one hand, for the enlightening of men and, on the other, for the deepening of its own tolerance and its inclusiveness of every truth of modern thinking. And there are those, apart from the Church and quite indifferent to it, who are no less forces making for horizon and insight. Mr. H. G. Wells, contemptible as are some of his moral ideas, yet in *Marriage* and *A Modern Utopia* gives his readers the wise and peculiarly unmodern advice to think things over. Even more significant in this direction is Maeterlinck in his cloud-like poetizings and beautiful incitements to brooding upon life as a whole. These outcroppings are an indication that the modern man's religion may yet reach a stage where it will gain some sense of remoter realities. There is coming, there



is bound to come, in the average man an adequacy of insight that shall make possible in him an interest not only in the future—that is already dawning in our growing enthusiasm for conservation projects—but in the past, in the historic, in the symbolic, and even at length in the supernatural.

Only let us hope that, as these so desirable extensions of modern religion begin to appear, the modern man may not again let slip that immediacy of practical idealism which is so pervasively the glory of the present.